

## *The Art of Rest: How to Find Respite in the Modern Age*

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### ABSTRACT

Socrates reportedly said we should be “aware of the barrenness of a busy life” (p. 2). In light of this, how many of us appreciate and make enough time for rest and respite? Faced with the stresses and demands of our fast-paced lives, is increased rest the prescription we need? Today, many people claim they have a rest deficit. But what is rest—and how complicated is it to understand? Are we too busy today to appreciate the need for rest? What are the benefits of rest? Can we shift our mindset to make time for rest and enjoy that rest? What are the most common ways we find rest? Claudia Hammond’s *The Art of Rest: How to Find Respite in the Modern Age* (2019) seeks to answer these questions, offering hope for the present and future. Indeed, her central argument is that the restorative state is good.

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## How to Find Respite in the Modern Age

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The *Art of Rest* borrows findings from The Rest Test survey (circa 2016) of 18,000 people in 135 countries; it found that we are experiencing a rest deficit: “... many of us feel we are not getting enough rest. Two-thirds of respondents said this was true of them and that they would like more rest. Women reported getting an average of ten minutes less rest each day than men, and people with caring responsibilities also had less rest. But it was younger people,” many of them working, who reported the least rest, comments Hammond (p. 2). Mentioned is the mobile phone which makes us contactable most of the time. The author partly managed this research project by focusing on the subjective experiences of “rest.” Hammond is an academic lecturer, psychologist researcher, book author, and BBC radio and television presenter. In 2020, her book *The Art of Rest* was shortlisted for the British Psychological Society Book Award for Popular Science.

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The book contains an Introduction (“A Call to Rest”) and ten chapters, in reverse order according to the popularity reported by the Rest Test respondents. The book emphasises rest, not what brings about happiness, sleep, or fun. So, its chapters reflect the focus on respite. Hammond remarks on the positive and negative aspects of each form of relaxation in each of the ten methods. She highlights that much depends on the individual’s personality and preferences; a combination of the following in moderation will probably provide results.

In the Introduction, an important point is made—echoing Socrates’s comment above—that, paradoxically, human restlessness and our ever-active brain have generated productivity and human progress; however, many people have become obsessed with being busy to the point that we should always be doing something. To create balance and well-being in our lives, we require rest. Indeed, Hammond says the best self-care is rest; in the United Kingdom, approximately half a million people encounter work-related stress. Research into rest shows that we become more productive, clear-headed, and creative after it.

Chapter Ten explores mindfulness, a well-documented technique for paying attention to the present moment on purpose and nonjudgmentally. It can induce a resting and calm state. Chapter Nine discusses watching television. Its advantage is that it is an absorbing experience that involves no physical or mental effort (unlike walking or sports). In addition, while passive, it can be communal, and viewing can be beneficial after a busy day. Hammond asks the reader to think about how the extent of the restfulness of an activity is dependent upon an activity preceding it. However, too much television viewing is linked with health problems.

Chapter Eight addresses daydreaming (mind wandering). Hammond explains that the brain is always active, even when calm and resting. Neuroscientists say this is the mind’s natural state. The key is to foster positive thoughts and memories over negative ones (mindfulness might help here). Bathing is discussed in Chapter Seven. The modern bath is warm, private, and in a room cut off from the rest of the home. Chapter Six reviews walking indoors and outdoors; walking can promote a restorative state; it is something one can do alone or with others, and because it is done at a slow pace, we can appreciate our environment up close.

Chapter Five’s heading is “Doing Nothing in Particular.” This chapter addresses the restful effects of inactivity, tea breaks, and holidays. However, doing nothing is “hard work,” as we might feel bored. The key is to embrace inactivity combined with other resting techniques. Chapter Four investigates listening to music. Much research is available on the benefits of different musical genres and how they can be immersive and soothing.

Chapter Three, titled “I Want to Be Alone,” discusses acting alone to undertake tasks (or not) and how this assists relaxation, creativity, and calmness. Loneliness is the negative side of solitude, as humans are generally social creatures. (Importantly, all the top five resting techniques are undertaken alone.) Chapter Two outlines spending time in nature (nature bathing), particularly in human-managed landscapes like parklands. The most popular form of rest was reading (Chapter One), with 58 per cent of respondents favouring it; reading is not passive; it might not be the most “enjoyable” pastime, but it is the one we turn to escape ourselves or learn. Finally, Hammond provides the reader with a twelve-point set of guidelines to help them achieve increased and more qualitative rest (“The Perfect Prescription for Rest”).

News reports based on social science research inform us regularly that many young and older people feel exhausted due to their work, social and home demands. Hammond’s book seeks to balance work and home life to facilitate rest and make our lives more enjoyable, with less exhaustion and giving us some control over how we live. For many people, the book’s content might be common knowledge. However, the work encourages the reader to reflect on their conception of “rest”; for some, this is an opportunity to evaluate their relationship with quality time doing things—or nothing at all—that will help restore them mentally, emotionally, and physically. If this induces better productivity, creativity, or an improved sense of well-being in individuals, it will bring us closer to living the “good life.”

### **Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s)